

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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SIX WAYS OF MANAGING NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES EXAMINED IN ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT

The operation of the system of 367 National Wildlife Refuges in 49 States--currently a subject of debate within the conservation community--is described in detail in a draft environmental statement (DES) filed recently by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with the Council on Environmental Quality.

The statement was prepared as a result of a lawsuit brought by private conservation groups concerned with how the refuge system was being managed. Changes in Federal budgeting procedures in recent years obscured the amount of money going into the refuge system because of the shift to management by program objectives.

Public comments are invited on the DES through February 7, 1976. Comments should be addressed to Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Wildlife Refuges, Washington, D.C. 20240. Copies of the DES may be obtained by writing to the above address.

The DES considers six different levels of management of the entire system over the next 10 years and describes what results can be expected at three levels of funding and with three different kinds of program emphasis. They range from reverting to a custodial or "mothball" status to going full speed ahead on program funding. Additionally, the DES describes the expected results from shifting first priority to endangered species from migratory birds. Also, it considers what effect the establishment of a separate agency of government to manage the refuge system would have. Lastly, it considers what effect the shifting of refuge management to other Federal or State agencies would have.

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CUSTODIAL LEVEL OF OPERATION: This alternative would reduce programs to the minimum needed to protect basic land and wildlife resources from unauthorized uses. Essentially, it is a standby or mothball level of operation which would require only about \$7.3 million annually by 1985. The current level of funding is over \$25 million annually. This course of action would reduce the system's capability of producing and maintaining wildlife significantly. Currently, refuge operations are "measured" by what is known as "outputs." With reduced management activities on refuge lands and waters the outputs produced by the refuge system in 1985 would be:

- endangered species use-days would decrease by 17 million from a current level of 142 million to 127 million use days.
- waterfowl production would decrease by 115,000 from a current level of 1,554,000 to 1,439,000 birds produced.
- wildlife oriented recreational opportunities would decrease by 21 million hours from a current level of 45 million to 24 million.

MID-RANGE BENEFIT LEVEL OF OPERATION: This alternative would substantially improve waterfowl production and endangered species protection, accommodate the trend of expanding numbers of refuge visitors, and halt deterioration of refuge facilities. It would require an annual expenditure of \$33.9 million annually by 1985. Minor increases would be noted in environmental effects as a result of this stepped-up activity. Some adverse economic impacts would occur due to the reduction in non-wildlife recreation. This moderate increase in management activities and staff additions would by 1985:

- increase endangered species use-days by 23 million.
- increase waterfowl produced by 900 thousand birds.
- add 11 million activity hours of wildlife oriented recreation.

MAXIMUM CAPACITY LEVEL OF OPERATION: This alternative calls for operating the refuge system at its maximum capacity to produce migratory birds, endangered species, and resident wildlife without degrading the environment. Some increase in adverse environmental effects would take place. It would require an annual expenditure of \$112.9 million by 1985. While providing for a doubling of public use of refuges, this alternative provides for new facilities, rehabilitation of existing facilities, and the necessary staff to accommodate the anticipated maximum levels of public use with safety to the public and protection to the wildlife. Operating at this level would:

- increase endangered species accommodation by 34.2 million use-days.
- increase waterfowl production by 1.5 million to 3.1 million birds produced.

--provide the necessary facilities and enforcement capabilities to meet Service standards for increasing recreational opportunities by 40 million hours.

ENDANGERED SPECIES EMPHASIS: This alternative would fulfill the needs of endangered species using refuge lands. It would also attain a moderate level of productivity for other forms of wildlife. It would require an annual expenditure of \$35.2 million by 1985. The increased adverse environmental impacts would be minor. This shift in program emphasis would by 1985:

--increase endangered species accommodation by 34.2 million use-days.

--increase waterfowl production by 900,000 birds.

--add 11 million hours of wildlife oriented recreation.

ESTABLISH A SEPARATE REFUGE SERVICE: This alternative would legislatively create a National Wildlife Refuge Service to provide direction, policy, and funding for the refuge system. Such legislation is now pending before Congress. This alternative would require an annual expenditure of \$33.9 million by 1985. The establishment of a higher national priority for the refuge system through Bureau or Service status would improve the organization's ability to compete among Government programs by providing budget identification. Through a moderate increase in management activities and staff additions the system would by 1985:

--increase endangered species use-days by 23 million.

--increase waterfowl production by 900,000 birds.

--add 11 million hours of wildlife oriented recreation.

SHIFT REFUGE MANAGEMENT TO OTHER AGENCIES: This alternative would delegate the operation of refuge units to those Federal and State agencies which might feasibly accept management. It would require an annual expenditure of \$28 million by 1985. This alternative would result by 1985 in:

--decrease in endangered species use of 7.2 million days.

--decline in waterfowl production of 200,000 birds.

--a shift in emphasis in wildlife oriented recreation from non-consumptive to consumptive use.

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